SATURDAY EVENING POST
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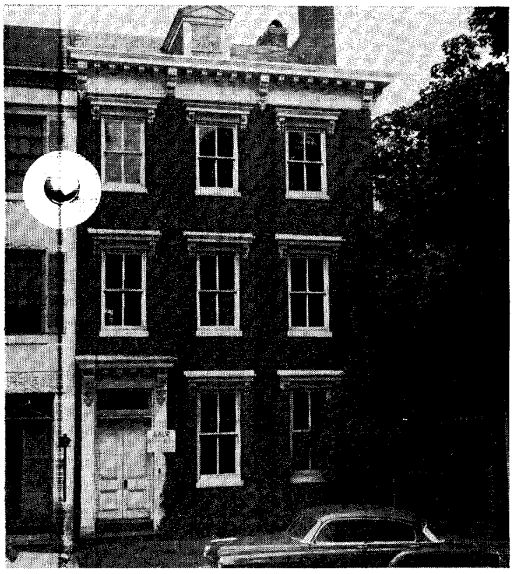
We Remodeled Our House . . . and How!

For seven months, the author battled with the painters, plasterers and plumbers who were converting her dilapidated dwelling into "a little palace." It got so her friends were afraid to ask, "How's the house coming?"

By SELWA ROOSEVELT



"It's a steal," gloated the author's husband on purchasing this Washington, D.C., house for $36,000.

"Roosevelts' Folly" our friends called it—and rightly so, I'm afraid. You see, my husband and I live in Georgetown, one of the oldest, most historic parts of Washington. Fancying ourselves adventurous types, we decided to buy a 100-year-old house, tear it apart and put it together again in proper shape for twentieth-century living.

It's not a bad idea really—if you love the house, know just exactly what you want to do with it, foresee the cost, have a bottomless pit of money, plus time and a nervous system immune to shock.

Alas, our only qualification was the first. We had lived in Georgetown for more than two years and, in the beginning, we were perfectly content with our little Victorian row house. But then a malady peculiar to these few square blocks near the Potomac hit us. Georgetown fever, it's called, and the symptoms are easy to recognize. Victims feel a burning desire to own one of the old Federal-type houses; they haunt real-estate agents in the frantic hope of latching onto a bargain; they fall, finally, into a senseless blabber about wanting to "express themselves" by remodeling a house.

And so, one Sunday, we found it! We were strolling along N Street—one of Georgetown's oldest—when we came upon an ancient brick ruin festooned with "For Sale" signs. We later learned these signs had been seen there, off and on, for years—with no takers. We found out the reasons for the no takers too. But when we saw this red-brick, Federal-type, four-story structure, it seemed the answer to our dreams.

Our long-suffering real-estate agent, Mrs. Howard McPeck, who could find solid virtues in the city dump, looked pale when we told her this was the house. She, poor dear, had been showing us Georgetown houses for over a year. Most of them had already been done over and were jewels. Each time she showed us one, we either didn't like the garden, the floor plan or the street. Or, as I so clearly remember saying to her, "Why, Mrs. McPeck, it would cost at least five thousand dollars to get this house into shape." Little did I know that, in a few short months, five thousand would begin to look like pin money.

My husband, Archie, says that only the male of the species has the power of decision. If it were left to women, he maintains, the unqualified "yes" or "no" would disappear from our vocabulary. Asserting this aggressively male characteristic, he made up his mind to buy the house the day we saw it. And he did not appreciate my pointing out that we both had demanding full-time (Continued on Page 44)

The dining room during restoration (left) and afterward (right). The Roosevelts were unable to move in until four months after the date originally set by their contractor. "He didn't deliberately deceive us," says Selwa. "He just didn't have the heart to tell us the awful truth."

He peered frantically at the blurred radar scope. Just one slip—and he would have a dead pilot on his conscience.

Panic on Runway 6

By FRANK HARVEY

It was ten o'clock at night at McGuire Air Force Base, in New Jersey, and they were all sitting around the kitchen table making Joe's mind up for him. They had been doing it for three hours, and now they just about had it done.

"If you pass up this chance," Ruth said, "you'll be sorry the rest of your life. We won't get a break like this again, Joe."

Sgt. Joe Hiltebrandt said, "The thing is, I don't know the first thing about used cars."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Nobody expects you to! The point is, Dick says we can make eight thousand dollars the first year. How much do you make running that crazy radar set out at the air base?"

Joe didn't answer that question. He'd been married to Ruth for almost twelve years and she knew very well what a master sergeant in the Air Force made. It wasn't $8000 a year.

"One more thing," Ruth said, "while we're on the subject. How long did you stay over in England on that last so-called three-month tour of temporary duty?"

"Now look, hon," Joe said. "They got my orders fouled up."

"How long?"

"All right," Joe said. "So it was fifteen months."

"Did the Air Force send me over to join you—the way they promised?"

The lost pilot's voice tore at his eardrums. "I'm out of fuel!"

"There were no quarters available."

Ruth gave a short laugh. "There never are, darling. Not for sergeants. For generals and bird colonels, but not for poor, broken-down, old — "

"Hey!" Dick Cavanaugh cut in. "Ruthie, baby! Let the guy up. We're trying to wangle him out of the Air Force, not into a divorce court!"

Dick Cavanaugh winked at Joe across the table. Dick was Ruth's brother. He was a big, easygoing guy with huge hands and deep-set eyes who looked, Ruth said, like Boris Karloff as a young man. She was really sold on Dick. So were lots of other people, without quite realizing why. Dick was the kind of guy who'd buy you a beer or play a few holes of golf with you, and he wouldn't say much, but later, when you got around to selling your car or getting another one, you found yourself looking in on Dick Cavanaugh. And once you had looked in on Dick, you had yourself a piece of transportation. It was no accident that he operated one of the largest automobile agencies on the East Coast.

Dick Cavanaugh said, "I got it figured, Joe. You and Ruth can take out eight thousand the first year—maybe more—and it's just the start. I picked up this big used car deal to round out my business, and it's got me snowed." Dick grinned at his sister. "Good men like the sergeant here are hard to find—and I'd like to keep the good guys in the family if we can."

"Please, Joe," Ruth said. "You'll like it when you get into it. I know you will."

"Sure," Joe said.

But he wasn't sure he'd like the used-car business when he got into it. As a matter of fact, he was pretty

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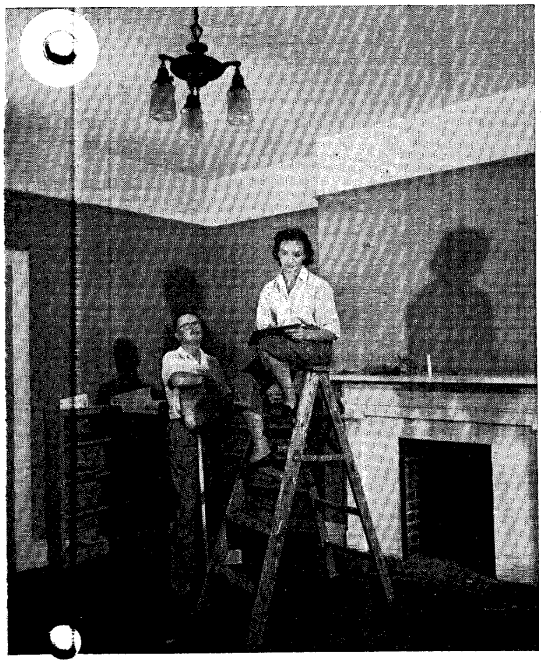
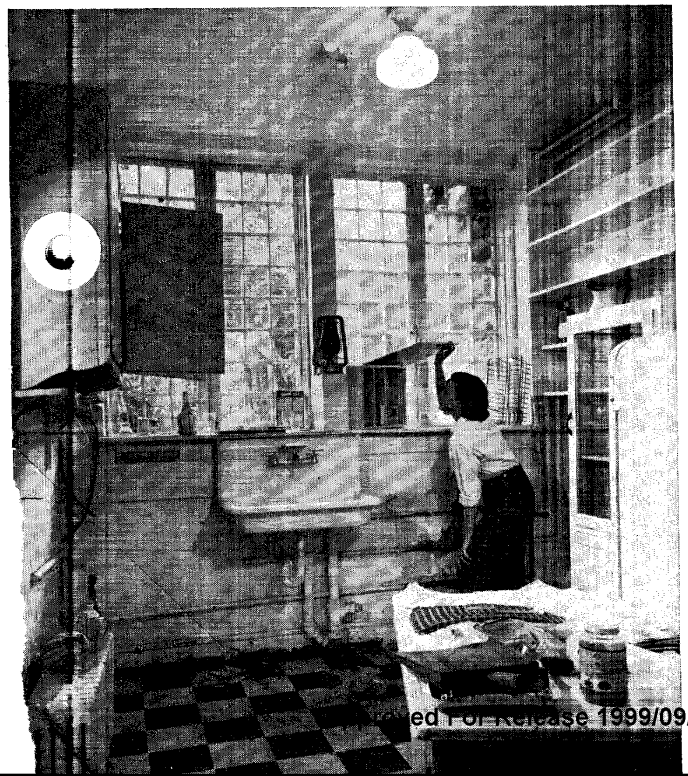
Photographs by Ollie Atkins



Above, the author and her husband make plans for the library. At right, the result. One charming feature of the old house: it had six fireplaces. The only hitch was that none of them worked.

Below, the kitchen they bought. At right, the kitchen they built. "We acquired a cavalier attitude about money. Nothing seemed expensive—a hundred more here or there, it was all just figures." But the remodeling bill totaled $10,000 more than they had figured on spending.



We Remodeled Our House . . . and How!

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s—I as a society columnist for the Evening Star and he as a member of the State Department; that we knew nothing about construction; and that, perhaps, it would cost more to remodel than we were prepared to spend.

When my arguments failed, I brought in a battalion of experts. A contractor breezed through the house, waved his hand majestically and announced it would take a mere $12,000 to convert this slum to a palace. Archie could stand my shilly-shallying no longer. He had the contract written, signed it and thrust it in front of me to make it legal. Again I wavered. For three days that piece of paper haunted me, until, in a surge of desperation, I put my name to it. With unseemly speed the owner, who was asking $45,000, accepted our offer of $36,000—not even a quibble. This should have aroused our suspicions. But with tight lips Archie continued to insist, "It's a steal."

This was in July, in the midst of a Washington heat wave, and most of our friends thought the temperature had addled our brains. We brought them around for guided tours with a commentary which went somewhat like this:

RCHIE: You enter through this vesti-, see? These next doors, which have be replaced of course, take you into the main hall. Isn't it nice and large?

FRIEND: What's this sag in the floor just under the staircase?

ARCHIE: Oh, that's just where the house has settled. You know these old houses. At least they've done all the settling they're going to do. Now look at this room just off the hall. This will be the library.

FRIEND: Hey, Archie, did you notice this wall of the so-called library is all plywood? It's wet and rotted. Looks as if most of your plaster here is gone.

ARCHIE: Oh, well. Of course, we'll have to patch the plaster. Now look at this room. This will be the dining room. Just look back here, with all those wonderful windows and these French doors overlooking the garden. Can you imagine a more cheerful place to have breakfast?

FRIEND (*looking out at a collection of tin cans, old tires and broken glass covering some thirty-five by seventy-five feet and filled with weeds higher than the first floor of the house*): Well, it does have possibilities. Say, what's all that plastic stuff covering these windows?

ARCHIE: I guess the people who lived re before covered the panes with it to the rain and wind out. I suppose e windows will have to go.

FRIEND: Look at that cement ledge under the window. Water seems to be leaking in from outside. We'll have to come to dinner in a boat!

ARCHIE (*determined to ignore all wisecracks*): Now, just off the dining room here will be the kitchen. And just off here is the furnace room. Look at this old-fashioned oil burner. Still got years of life, though.

FRIEND: But, Archie, that's a converted coal furnace. Looks in bad shape to me.

ARCHIE: Never mind that. Now see, from the furnace room you go out to the garage. Isn't it wonderful having a garage in a crowded place like Georgetown?

FRIEND: I don't think it's big enough for the new models. Have you measured?

ARCHIE: Oh, well, there's no law that says you have to shut your garage door. Just wait until you see the drawing room.

(*Archie and friend go upstairs into large room which covers entire second floor, with double fireplaces and French doors leading out to a porch enclosed with small-paned windows. To one side is a back staircase going up to the bedroom floor. On the other side is an antiquated bathroom, circa 1900.*)

ARCHIE: Isn't this dramatic? Why, it's almost a ballroom.

FRIEND: It certainly is big enough. Have you got furniture to fill it? . . . Hey, Archie, what's this large hump in the center of the floor?

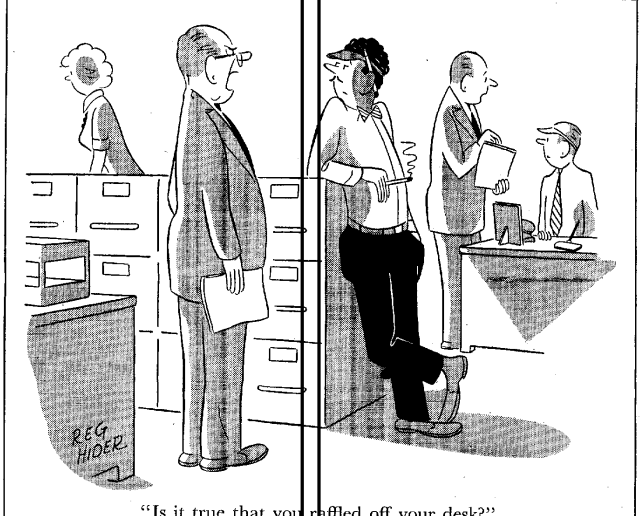
ARCHIE (*visibly annoyed by now*): Don't you understand? The house has settled on both ends, leaving a slight hump in the middle. Now look out here on the porch, which we will make into a solarium. We're going to tear out that bathroom and make it a bar, with a refrigerator and everything. We'll put a powder room out in the hall. We'll tear out that staircase and put in a large auxiliary coat closet for parties.

FRIEND: It certainly will be nice for parties. But will you have any money left to give them?

And so it went. The third floor, with three bedrooms, had not one closet. The bedroom overlooking the garden, which was to be ours, had a rickety porch around it and another turn-of-the-century bathroom. The front bedroom, for guests, had one huge radiator taking up an entire wall. A small room next to the guest room was earmarked for another bathroom. On the top floor where we planned to install my fourteen-year-old stepson were two little dormer bedrooms.

We failed to notice there were no radiators on the fourth floor and none in the master bedroom. But our next-door neighbor told us all. The previous occupant, she disclosed, had had to bring her children downstairs to sleep in the drawing room in winter because the top floors were so cold. "It's a nice cool house in the summer, though," she added.

All these calamities, plus our friends' derision, made no dent on Archie. I confess, though, that I found myself growing daily more depressed. I think it was the day when I learned that all six fireplaces were unworkable and fire hazards to boot that my attitude changed. Suddenly I was determined to show everybody that this could be a dream house and it was they who lacked imagination.



"Is it true that you raffled off your desk?"

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Armed only with determination and bravado, we mustered an army of contractors and their henchmen to decide who would have the dubious honor of performing this miracle. Thinking we were playing it smart, we decided to call in general contractors first, let them give us estimates for the complete job. Then, by way of checking on them, we called in individual plumbers, electricians, painters, plasterers, and so on, to compare their estimates with those of the big boys. We also had a big firm give us a price, as well as a young man just starting out. Sounds very logical, doesn't it?

But logic doesn't help much when you get the entire building industry of a city furious at you. For more than a month I had an army of men running in and out of the house. And each time I went through with a new contractor, I had changed my mind as to what I wanted done, so there was never any fair basis for comparison.

I learned that contractors are a gloomy lot. Especially when it comes to old houses. They tell you all the horrors they've experienced, and warn you they must take them into account when preparing their estimates. One cheerful type discovered that our chimney slanted dangerously. Another said the floors were sinking. Still another observed that the house was constructed of salmon brick. "Very inferior brick," he said. "Lots of it will have to be replaced."

In all these powwows I picked up a lot of subtle "housemanship"—or how to be one up on contractors. There are certain expressions which create an illusion of knowledge. For example, as you look over the plumbing, you should say, "Of course, these are all lead pipes and will have to be replaced." (You have learned this from the last plumber.) Then you casually mention twelve-light windows (that means six small panes above and below); or double-hung windows (just plain old windows that go up and down). You ought also to inquire knowingly as to where the stack should go—that's the main pipe that connects the plumbing to the sewer system. And, if you really want to make an impression, you might drop in such terms as "pointing up" the brick, "furring" the walls and fixing the downspouts, gutters and flashings. (I'm still not sure just which is which.)

After a week or two of frenzied activity, we sat back to wait for the estimates. Nothing happened. No word from anyone. Apparently, they were so busy that our paltry thousands meant little to them. When the figures finally did come, as logic would have it, the most expensive and famous contractor gave the highest estimate, while the lowest came from the young, unproved builder. I was right back where I had started and a month had passed. After a second go-around of estimates and indecision, and still another month wasted, I had yet to find my man.

"For heaven's sake," my husband said. "You aren't going to marry the guy. Let's take the one who offers us the best deal!"

But he didn't understand. By now, I was convinced that choosing a contractor was really more difficult than choosing a husband. And then it happened. The heavens smiled one day and sent us Russell Eldridge—a well-known Georgetown builder, famous for his gruff manner and frank comments.

A huge man, with startling white hair and a booming voice, Russell Eldridge looked at the two of us after surveying the house and informed us we were a "passel of fools." I realized immediately that here was a man who could size up a situation accurately.

His first act was to tell us we shouldn't have bought the house; his second was to tell us we paid too much for it. His third was to take the job.

And so, with a cost-plus contract, Mr. Eldridge began work. Let me warn you! Never, but never, accept a contractor's word for when a job will be finished. We were told we might get in in three months. We actually moved in seven months later. It's not that Mr. Eldridge deliberately deceived us. Contractors, I learned, just don't have the heart to tell you the awful truth.

The first few days were a joy of destruction. Stairs were ripped out; floors torn up. The men buzzed along for several weeks, nailing two-by-fours all over the place, until one day I stopped by and found the place deserted.

Frantically, I telephoned Mr. Eldridge. The reason, it seems, was the district government. A zealous inspector had happened by, found them putting a lining in the fireplace without a proper permit, and ordered all workers off the job until such permit was granted.

It galled me that some bureaucrat I had never seen could throw my life into a turmoil. Instead of simply obeying the law, as Archie would have us do, I insisted on having a tearful scene with the inspector. This, of course, did no good. I later realized that the stringent building codes, especially for Georgetown, were designed to protect us.

There was another authority to be faced—the Fine Arts Commission. These illustrious citizens, dedicated to preserving the Georgetown tradition, will not allow so much as a window to be changed without their clearance. After the workers had torn out the two casement windows in the kitchen, the inspector happened by and ordered work stopped until the commission put its blessing on it. This meant that for three weeks a huge, gaping hole in the back of the house gave the elements free entry.

Now that I look back on this adventure, I realize that Mr. Eldridge was a diplomat extraordinary. During the seven months he had the misfortune to be associated with us, I must have telephoned him on an average of once daily. Never did he sound annoyed, impatient or tired. He answered my foolish questions as if they were intelligent. He humored me and pretended that my call was an essential part of the day's business.

Then one morning an unusual thing happened.

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(Continued from Page 44) Mr. Eldridge called me. I was in my office, just about begin the day's work.

'Mrs. Roosevelt," he said, "the men rted digging the footings for the walls the garden and they've come across a cistern thirty-five feet deep, and empty. Looks as if it formerly supplied your house and the one next door, for the cistern is centered in the middle of the property line."

At lunchtime we went to the house. The laborers opened a manhole and inside was a huge circular cistern with cement walls. We looked into the impenetrable abyss and then dropped a brick. It seemed like hours before we heard a clunk.

Now this wasn't the first cistern ever found in Georgetown, and a friend of ours even found a graveyard in her back yard. But I didn't see why this had to happen to us—especially since much of the debris from the house had already been hauled away, and we had to have, at vast expense, rocks and dirt to fill the cavernous depths.

About this time I read an article which said that one of the greatest crises in a woman's life was redecorating a house. Up to that point I hadn't let my volatile Mediterranean temperament get the better of me. But reading I was in a crisis, I decided to live it to the hilt, and Archie had to bear the brunt of it. A peace-loving an, my husband finally decided the only we could avoid open warfare was to e out certain areas of control. He was be responsible for the outside of the house, the garden and the bar—his pride and joy. I was to have the rest. But it didn't work. Jurisdictional disputes arose and there were whole days when we agreed it would be better not to speak.

As his jurisdiction was somewhat confined, Archie decided his time would be better spent in planning the garden. Of course, in midwinter it was impossible to plant anything, and what's more, the workmen were trampling all about.

However, since the garden was filled with strange wild growths, he set about cutting down the jungle. One day I invaded Archie's territory and found the wisteria, which the neighbors had told me was the finest in the area, leveled to the ground. All that remained was a scarred and bleeding stump.

"Murderer!" I cried, pointing an accusing finger at my spouse.

A tearful scene ensued and he went around with a guilty look until spring, when the wisteria forced itself out of the stump with such exuberance that soon the same neighbors who had bemoaned its passing muttered dire warnings that this parasitic plant would strangle our gutters, away our walls and gradually destroy house.

would warn any couples intent on remodeling an old house to be sure their marriage is as durable as our wisteria. You will find your wedded bliss subjected to stresses and strains the marriage counselors never dreamed of.

And that goes for your friends too. We discovered how quickly one can lose friends simply by boring them to death. During the "reconstruction period" we knew only one subject of conversation—the house. You know how annoying it is to ask someone how he feels and then listen to an hour-long clinical analysis. Well, our friends soon learned not to ask the obvious "How's the house coming along?" They knew we would tell them—and in excruciating detail.

The only friends I made during this entire period were two women who were involved in similar projects. When we spotted one another at parties, we would instantly rush to a corner and compare notes until dinner was announced. If we were seated anywhere near one another, we continued through dinner and after.

What friends we managed to retain were subjected to repeated tours of the house. We were most anxious that they see the intricate plumbing and wiring which left great holes in floors, walls and ceilings. Somehow, it seemed a shame that our life's blood was going into things people would never see, once the work was completed.

After showing off our exciting array of pipes and wires, it began to be embarrassing when friends remarked they could see no change since the last time they were herded through. Obviously they thought we had run short of cash in the middle of the job. Actually, things were at a standstill because for more than a month the plasterers obstinately refused to show up.

Whenever I queried anyone about the absent plasterers, there was always some mysterious excuse about the weather. When they finally did begin, in the coldest, dampest days of winter, I asked, "But what about the weather?" They looked at me with shocked surprise and said, "Weather? Weather? Why, that doesn't matter at all."

In the bitter cold they set to work, with no heat in the house except some fantastic contraptions breathing fire which they brought with them. As we came by for our daily inspection, we stumbled over piles of congealed plaster and assorted rubbish. There was an occasional scene when I found them gravely plastering over the electrical outlets we had gone to such trouble to install.

The worst crisis was over one lone medicine cabinet. I had planned to make the powder room look as little like a bathroom as possible. The last thing I wanted in it was a medicine cabinet.

"Every bathroom has a medicine cabinet!" the plasterers insisted and, ignoring my instructions, they left a large hole in one wall where a cabinet would fit. It took months to get it covered over.

Thanks to Mr. Eldridge, we solved the worst problem of all—the master bedroom. Dark and gloomy, cut off from the light by the original brick wall which divided it from a rickety porch, it was straight out of a Charles Addams cartoon, and I half expected an octopus to pop out from a murky cranny.

One day as I opened the door, I was half blinded by the light. To my horror, I saw that Mr. Eldridge had knocked out the wall and some of the roof in the process. And to my frenzied protestations he said proudly, "We'll plaster this porch area and you've almost doubled the size of the bedroom. Now you have a wonderful view of the city, and I'm bringing the garden right into your bedroom."

When this messiest period was over and the house swept out for the ninety-fifth time, we at last began to see flesh on the skeleton. Then began the period which nearly finished me.

In his abrupt manner, Mr. Eldridge informed me one day that the carpenters would begin the next morning on the top floor and work down. He wanted me every day for decisions as to closets, moldings, mantels and trim. This meant saying "yes" or "no" hundreds of times. Every decision was irrevocable, and Happy Arch, as I began calling him, couldn't understand why it was such agony for me.

Somehow I managed to tell them about doors, valances and windows, and only changed my mind about three times on each item. But the problem of moldings was the worst. I broached the subject to Archie, and he asked, "What are they?" Now, however, he points with pride and makes his friends feel quite stupid as he talks knowingly about "four-inch crown," "dental" and other types of moldings.

Having struggled with me for weeks, the carpenters had it easy compared with the painters. Mr. Eldridge sent me a genial couple named Stanley and Johnny. They were happy and eager as we began planning colors. Within two weeks Johnny was not speaking to me.

You see, I wanted a certain shade of pinkish-white for my walls. But they weren't to look either pink or white. The painters found my instructions somewhat baffling. We covered rooms with samples of everything that might be the right color. I wasted two weeks of their time and still couldn't make a decision. I even took Stanley with me to one of the plush embassies on Massachusetts Avenue where I thought I might find the right color. Imagine, if you can, a cordial but somewhat astonished ambassador receiving guests for lunch and at the same time escorting Stanley in his paint-bespattered overalls and me in my Bermuda shorts through the elegant surroundings.

Still unable to capture the elusive color, I fled to an interior decorator, saw the color in her sample book and shrieked with joy as I brought it to Stanley, only to discover it was the color he had originally mixed two weeks ago. But he smiled—a tired, wan smile he wore on his face like a mask. Every day for weeks thereafter he put that "funny pink"—as he insisted on calling it—on three quarters of the walls.

While they painted, I selected wallpaper. This was another effort which left some people speechless and almost brought Mr. Eldridge and me to harsh words. In the dining room I decided I wanted an Early-Victorian atmosphere—a whim which led me to select a paper with huge blue birds and great baskets of red flowers. Even the paper hangers hated it, but there it was, delivered and paid for, and up it went. They were halfway through when I walked in, took one look and screamed at them to stop.

"Look, lady, isn't this the paper you picked out?" said the irascible Johnny, who was speaking again, but only just.

"Yes, but it's terrible," I said through my tears, and then tried my one little deal in this entire business. I became convinced in my mind that the paper was defective. (It was only my mind that was.) I refused to pay for it. Mr. Eldridge finally had to get a representative from the manufacturer to put in writing that the paper was guaranteed perfect before I would accept it. But I still changed it, and so paid for papering the room twice.

By this time we had acquired such a cavalier attitude about money that nothing seemed expensive—a hundred more here or there—it was all just figures.

Then still more decisions—light fixtures, linoleum, hardware, and finally sanding the floors. The floors were the original ones, but covered with layers of black paint. Mr. Eldridge had predicted they would look awful. For once, he was wrong and cheerfully admitted it. After being scraped, sanded and waxed, the wide pine boards gave off a rich glow which only 100-year-old wood can have.

Now the decisions were all behind me and I was feeling happy and carefree. All that remained was moving. All, that is, except the day of reckoning. The bill. We had estimated the maximum we should spend was $16,000. You can imagine our shock when we learned we had spent over $10,000 more than that! How? It's easy. At first I thought I must have misjudged Mr. Eldridge's character. But he sat down in the midst of my hysterics and slowly explained every last penny. We had spent it all right and, what's more, we'll probably be paying the rest of our lives.

After absorbing this bitterest of all pills, my husband came home one evening and blithely announced that he had just been assigned to two months of temporary duty abroad. Wasn't it sad, he added, that I would have to move alone? But I fooled him. I spent the months he was away putting the final touches to the house. The day after he returned, exhausted from his trip to the Near East and Asia, we moved.

So here we are in our little palace. And despite the headaches and heartaches, it really has everything we wanted. The library, lined with books, looks as if we had lived there always. The dining room, with the south wall almost completely glass, gives the illusion of being indoors and out at the same time. The drawing room is large and spacious, with a solarium outside, and Archie's modern, well-equipped bar. The once-dark master bedroom is light and cheerful; we can at last have guests in comfort, and my young stepson can mess his top-floor quarters all he wants. The garden, with its new walls and brick terrace, is a bit bare, but wonder of wonders, it's green!

Our skeptical friends now agree it's a dream, but a few die-hards have ventured the opinion that perhaps we could have built a new house for less money, and less wear and tear on our nervous systems.

I doubt it, but even so, it's hard to translate for someone else the joy of taking something decaying and dying, and breathing new life into it, making it proud and beautiful once more. THE END

"I thought some of our guests would never leave."

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